

Lindsay C. Watson, *Magic in Ancient Greece and Rome*,
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Over the past 30 years, there has been an upsurge in the number of publications on magic in ancient Greece and Rome.¹ One can now add to them the latest volume by Lindsay C. Watson, Honorary Associate Professor of Classics and Ancient History at the University of Sydney, the author of *Arae: The Curse Poetry of Antiquity* (Leeds 1991), *A Commentary on Horace's Epodes* (Oxford 2003), *Martial Select Epigrams* (Cambridge 2003), *Juvenal: Satire 6* (Sydney 2014) and *Martial* (London–New York 2015)—the last three with Patricia Watson.

Given the abundance of literature devoted to ancient magic in all its aspects, the immediate questions that spring to mind are how this new study distinguishes itself from previous ones and what it adds to the scholarly discussion. The first easily noticeable novelty of Watson's approach is his desire to show ancient magic in its purely practical dimension—as a profitable business, a tool used to achieve specific goals. As he explicitly states: “magical acts have a sharp and exclusive focus on the end result, large or small, and all its energies are ultimately channelled towards that outcome” (p. 3). Consequently, Watson eschews extended deliberations on psychology and anthropology of magic, elaborate definitions and jargon; similarly, the history and state of research are given only on a need-to-know basis. Nevertheless, simple does not equal simplistic: the volume upholds the norms of scholarly rigour and meticulously refers to Watson's sources and further readings. Accordingly, what Watson achieves is quite unlike the recent treatises on magic by Ogden or Collins. His is a book accessible to a generalist reader, a working introduction to the subject, however, a degree of familiarity with Greek and Roman authors or background in classics are recommended to make the most of Watson's analysis.

¹ See esp. G. Luck, *Arcana Mundi: Magic and the Occult in the Greek and Roman Worlds*, Baltimore 1985; 2nd ed. 2006; C. A. Faraone, D. Obbink (eds.), *Magika Hiera: Ancient Greek Magic and Religion*, New York–Oxford 1991; J. G. Gager, *Curse Tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World*, Oxford 1992; F. Graf, *Magic in the Ancient World*, Cambridge, MA–London 1997; C. A. Faraone, *Ancient Greek Love Magic*, Cambridge, MA 1999; S. I. Johnston, *Restless Dead: Encounters between the Living and the Dead in Ancient Greece*, Berkeley 1999; M. W. Dickie, *Magic and Magicians in the Graeco-Roman World*, London–New York 2001; D. Ogden, *Magic, Witchcraft, and Ghosts in the Greek and Roman Worlds: A Sourcebook*, Oxford 2002 and *Night's Black Agents: Witches, Wizards and the Dead in the Ancient World*, London–New York 2008; D. Collins, *Magic in the Ancient Greek World*, Malden–Oxford 2008; M. Martin, *La Magie dans l'Antiquité*, Paris 2012; D. J. Collins (ed.), *Magic and Witchcraft in the West: From Antiquity to the Present*, Cambridge 2015. Almost all of these works, save for Luck, Gager, Martin and Collins' latest, are also included in the bibliography of the reviewed volume.

The whole work divides into seven chapters devoted to the selected most representative aspects of ancient magic. In the introductory chapter (pp. 1–22) Watson discusses the discovery, publication and subsequent research on the so-called *Greek Magical Papyri*—the single most important source on Graeco-Egyptian magic practices. Chapter two, “The Violence of Amatory Magic” (pp. 23–56), and three, “Defixiones: A Recent History” with “Appendix: Did Defixiones Work?” (pp. 57–98), respectively deal with the corpus of amateur love spells and curse tablets, with the author showcasing them in light of latest scholarly breakthroughs. Significantly, Watson discusses and challenges the recently popular trend to underplay the violence of such spells by treating them as purely symbolic or therapeutic projections of magical practitioners; as the author convincingly demonstrates, the threat of what he rightly described as “sex-magic” was by no means perceived as empty in the antiquity. Particularly enlightening is Watson’s juxtaposition of such spells with ancient Greek and Roman literary references on magic, thanks to which the author can refute some commonly held yet unsubstantiated scholarly opinions on ancient magic e.g. on alleged functional gender-specific divides in the ancient magical praxis.

The following two chapters, “Magic and Herbs” (pp. 99–126, by Lindsay Watson) and “Animals in Magic” (pp. 127–165 and an appendix on animal amulets, by Patricia Watson), in my opinion constitute the most outstanding and original part of the volume, with both authors delving into issues unjustly omitted in similar studies on magic. Having analyzed waste and residue left from magical practices, authors examine the use of ingredients—plant and animal parts—in magic: their harvesting according to appropriate rituals, factors determining ingredient choice, and manner in which they may be employed.

The sixth chapter, “Fictional Witches” (pp. 167–202), presents material already covered in detail by other authors such as Ogden and Dickie; Watson’s originality, however, lies in his diachronic focus on the ever-shifting literary images of ancient witches. Watson’s aim is to gauge to what degree literary depictions of witches were shaped by real magical practices and/or by authors’ *licentia poetica*. Other research themes examined in this chapter include the progressive literary diminishment of an ancient witch, from awesome divine sorceresses like Circe or Medea to ridiculed, ugly or ineffectual crones, and the pervasive literary gendering of magical practitioners as female, despite the evidence of male involvement in the ancient magical praxis.

Finally, the last, most cursory and definitely the least developed chapter, “Human Sacrifice in Ancient Magic?” (pp. 203–225), considers the problem of historicity of human sacrifices as reflected in Roman texts, with particular focus on child sacrifices in allegedly magical rites. Regrettably, Watson appears both to have run out of space and to have approached the immensely complex topic with an unshakeable yet questionable conviction in his mind: almost all of such accusations were fabrication, exaggeration or slander against undesirable individuals and groups. Watson’s argument, however, never completely unfolds before it is wrapped again: in just twenty pithy pages. He diachronically juxtaposes a jumble of ancient references with some generalizations and sketchy insights on modern Satanic practice to claim ancient sacrifice was more hearsay than fact. Nevertheless, such a slipshod approach fails when confronted with such a complex phenomenon as ancient human sacrifice, which was reported in literary, historical and

legal testimonies, remaining mired in scholarly controversy. Watson arbitrarily assembles a selection of far-flung literary sources (e.g. Sallust, Horace, Petronius, Philostratus, Cassius Dio, and Christian apologetic literature) and pits it against WWI propaganda materials and sensationalist 1990s press articles. Although he analyses the problematic material with his usual vigor, the structure of his argument fails to convince and appears inchoate at its best and chaotic at its worst. Furthermore, due to Watson's conscious avoidance of defining what ancient magic was, one can doubt whether all parts of the collected material refer to 'magic' as understood by either ancient/modern practitioners or general audiences; this disregard for problems of nomenclature and hermeneutics of magic characteristically permeates the entire volume, although it only becomes troubling in the last chapter.

Devoid of the conclusive chapter, the book seems to be more of a bundle of stand-alone studies rather than a unified whole. Nevertheless, all its parts work together well to support the author's central argument about the mundane practicality of ancient magic, paradoxically so seldom discussed at any length in similar studies. Although not without some shortcomings, Watson's book is undoubtedly a valuable contribution towards our understanding of ancient magic that perfectly complements previous publications on that subject.

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